



EE Certification: Making Best Practice Standard Practice

by Joanne M. Lozar Glenn

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- Jane Eller

Talk to recently certified environmental educators about their certification experience, and this is what you hear: It was hard. The logistics were daunting—the paperwork, the record keeping, finding the time. Tailoring the evidence to demonstrate competency. Dealing with pedagogy and “eduspeak.” And they’d do it all over again. Absolutely.

“It gives you a different perspective. We see ourselves more as a profession now, a group of people with common goals,” says Jane Eller, Executive Director of Kentucky’s Environmental Education Council. The group to which Eller refers is the group of 36 environmental educators certified in Kentucky in 2005 and perhaps by inference, the environmental educators in other states who have committed themselves to becoming certified.

It’s a big commitment—in Kentucky, for example, you give fifteen days out of your year. And what do you get? “Not a job—at least not yet,” Eller says. But she has waiting lists for getting into the program. People you wouldn’t expect—lawyers, physicians, and even a county judge, in addition to the nonformal educators the program was designed to serve. Other states that have established certification programs (North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Utah) are seeing similar things: environmental educators and others holding themselves accountable for meeting best practices by pursuing certification.

Why? Because certification holds the best hope for making best practice standard practice and raising the level of professionalism within the field.

Photo provided by Doug McLaren



*Participants in Kentucky’s
first EE certification class.*

Certification and Accreditation: The National Perspective

As states continue to build and/or refine their certification programs for nonformal environmental educators, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) is developing criteria that will allow it to act as an accrediting body for states' programs. Through its Certification Advisory Committee (CAC), NAAEE will assess state-level certification programs and accredit them if they meet agreed-upon standards. These criteria are in draft mode, according to Brenda Weiser, director of EE at the Environmental Institute of Houston and chair of the CAC, and are based on the Guidelines for Excellence series.

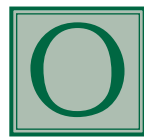
"States will need to document how they administer their certification programs and that their requirements are competency-based," Weiser says. "They will also have to document their plan for program operations and a plan for program evaluation and improvement."

Weiser has received inquiries from a number of states interested in establishing EE certification programs, among them Oregon, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Minnesota, Maryland, and some of the northeastern states. "I've told them we're waiting for the accreditation component to be finalized," she says. "In the meantime, they can work on building support by going to different stakeholders to get them interested."

When the accreditation criteria are finalized by NAAEE's Board of Directors, states will have a firm idea of what it takes for a certification program to be accredited and several models that can serve as examples of approved programs. States can then shape their certification programs to satisfy accreditation criteria as well as meet state needs for environmental education.

"It won't be a cookie cutter format," Weiser says, "and that seems to fit the field."

EE Certification: Some History



"Over the last 50 years, in almost every professional area, there's been a trend to develop certification programs," says William Dent, former executive director of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), citing such diverse examples as medical board certification and the National Association for Interpretation (NAI)'s certification program.

In 1996, North Carolina was the first state to develop an environmental education certification program. NAAEE's 1996 publication of the *Guidelines for the Initial Preparation of Environmental Educators* (re-released in 2004 as *Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators*) "... set the environmental education field down the path of a competency-based approach" to EE certification. States, four of them supported by the Environmental Education and Training Partnership (EETAP) through funding from the U.S. EPA's Office of Environmental Education, were free to develop their own programs in accordance with these *Guidelines* and their states' own needs, and to establish individual methods for demonstrating whether competency has been achieved (Glenn, 2004).

In Kentucky, for example, cohorts get together over several weekends for workshops throughout the state. In Utah, certification candidates are paired with mentors, who guide them as they strive to demonstrate competencies described in designated rubrics for each required environmental education theme (environmental literacy, history, professional requirements, planning and implementation, and assessment and evaluation). In Texas, candidates must submit a video of themselves delivering an EE lesson along with other documents attesting to their knowledge and skills.

Though certification does not guarantee competency, the certification process assures that candidates have met certain minimum standards for knowledge and experience within the field.

"The ultimate consumer of services then becomes more discriminating and will generally prefer the professional who at least has that level of public recognition and training," Dent says.

Growing, Personally and Professionally

The level of quality and legitimacy that certification offers is one reason Kerry Case, Utah House Director at Utah State University Extension, decided to seek EE certification. “EE can often be marginalized,” she says. “It’s sometimes considered ‘soft’ and may not receive the attention it deserves as a discipline.”

Another reason was that a large part of Case’s job involves EE, and she had had no formal EE training. Case, who’s been in Utah’s program since Summer 2005 and expects to be certified by March 2006, holds a master’s degree in nonprofit management and environmental science. “But none of it focused on the theory and content that were part of environmental education,” she says. She found the mentoring relationship that’s part of the Utah model invaluable.

“There’s something to having a real expert in the field guide your inquiry,” she says, explaining that her mentor pointed her to questions that as a novice she would never have thought to ask, such as “How do you involve students in setting their own learning goals and evaluating their success?”

“A big part of what we do is youth education,” Case says. “[The certification program] has greatly improved our evaluation strategies.”

Assessment and evaluation were also a challenge for Cheryl Stanco, Project Learning Tree Co-Coordinator at the Texas Forestry Association. Stanco is one of eight participants piloting Texas’s EE certification program. Even though she’s an EE “veteran,” she decided to pursue certification for both professional and personal reasons. “Professionally, how can you expect others to do what you’re not willing to do yourself?” she says. “And personally, I’ve been [in the field] for 19 years. When you get to the level I’ve reached, it’s easy to get stagnant. But it’s important to me to be able to hone my craft. [Certification] has boosted me out of my complacency.”

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Photo provided by Jane Eller

Joe Baust instructs Kentucky’s 2005 inaugural class of environmental educators seeking certification.

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Learning What We Don't Know

Even though she has not yet completed the certification process, Stanco says the program has already given her an awareness of her strengths and weaknesses. “I have lots to learn about formative and summative evaluation,” Stanco says, “and I’m teaching myself as I go along.”

Photo provided by Cheryl Stanco



Texas certification candidate Cheryl Stanco stands in the center of a Habitat Lap Sit at her state's Teachers' Conservation Institute.

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- Bora Simmons

This kind of “gap analysis”—the ability to highlight strengths and weaknesses, and with the knowledge gained, address the gaps—is a hallmark of certification programs, and one of the most important ways certification contributes to raising the level of professionalism.

“It’s the classic ‘Now I have a better sense of what I don’t know,’” says Bora Simmons, professor at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. “The pitfall that we all run into is not knowing what we don’t know. Going through a certification program . . . is extremely valuable for identifying areas where you will need continuing professional and personal development.”

With respect to nonformal environmental educators specifically, EE certification gives them the background in instructional strategies that many of them lack. Forester Doug McLaren, for instance, who was certified in Kentucky in 2005, says that the subject matter in the program was easy for him, but the pedagogy and policy were hard, even though he has “. . . dealt with classrooms before and understands a little bit about the needs and concerns of classroom teachers.” McLaren, who works with the University of Kentucky cooperative extension in Lexington, says that what he learned in the certification program totally changed how he teaches (see “Roundup” on next page).

Roundup: Speaking Out on Certification

In this round-up, environmental educators share how EE certification has impacted their practice, and their professional identity.



Jennifer Tucker Visitacion, Utah Society for Environmental Education, Salt Lake City: Certification's essential for what I do. Going through the certification process has provided me with a deeper understanding of the guidelines and a certain amount of confidence in my ability to represent the field of environmental education.

Cheryl Stanco, Texas Forestry Association, Lufkin: I learned so much working with the Certification Advisory Committee and EETAP programs. As an applicant, I don't necessarily see a change in my job, but I see an enhanced quality that becomes more and more recognized by those I serve.



Kerry Case, Utah House, Utah State University Extension Service, Kaysville: Many people come into EE with expertise in a particular field but without training in education. Certification is probably the quickest and most effective way to get that. Also, we hope that potential funders will see a certified education staff as a sign of a quality program.

Libby Wilcox, Office of Environmental Education, Raleigh, NC: I'm hearing more often that people have been hired because they're certified, and I'm seeing ["certification preferred"] more often on job announcements. If I [were looking to hire] and found someone I liked but who didn't have certification, I'd hire that person and then require [him or her] to start working on it.



Doug McLaren, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Lexington: I grew up under the philosophy of "stand and deliver." Now I go in and ask open-ended questions. [The audience] does not sit there as idle objects to pour information into. I realize now that . . . the best way in the world to get an education [is] . . . to be involved."

Jane Eller, Kentucky Environmental Education Council, Frankfort: That EE is seen as tree hugging boggles my mind. I cannot imagine anything more complex than [understanding] the interconnectedness of human and natural systems—I can articulate that better now than I ever could before taking the course. Certification has impacted how I think of myself: as an environmental educator rather than as an agency head who's just supporting environmental education.



Leslie DuBey, Big Thicket National Preserve, Kountze, TX: As a manager, [pursuing certification] has changed how I do my job. I've raised the standards for programs I partner with and programs that I endorse. And it's given me more leverage to make sure not only my programs but also my staff meets higher standards.

Developing the Argument

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McLaren would love to see more certified nonformal educators working in classrooms. Yet despite how much he values what the program's done for him, that value hasn't yet come across to the classroom teachers in his region.

"I thought I'd go into the EE program, and then with the label of certified instructor, they'd see me as . . . [qualified to] understand their educational needs . . . and reinforce any issues they felt uncomfortable [teaching]," he says. "I did not find that to be the case. Even my employer, who supported the efforts I put into being certified, doesn't totally understand how EE certification can benefit the learning in the classroom."

That will change in time, Simmons and others believe. "All of the reasons for getting certified—[for example, enhancing] your professional development and qualifications—will still be there whether or not your employer cares or knows," Simmons says, "because you've been recognized by others in the field for your accomplishment and skills."

Having said that, however, "It is essential and important that we develop the argument [for certification] well," she adds, ". . . and be more diligent about getting the information out to employers and their clients."

Simmons believes that promoting certification is work cut out for the states, because they're the closest to knowing who the players are. She thinks that an effort at developing a convincing message, perhaps in a packet of information that would provide answers to Frequently Asked Questions and provide appropriate background and statistics, would be helpful to states building coalitions to encourage certification. "National organizations [like NAAEE] going to other national organizations like the U.S. Forest Service makes sense, too," she says, "but it needs to be thought through carefully so that [national groups don't] step on states' toes and do give them the support they need."

Photo provided by Doug McLaren



Doug McLaren working with high school students of the Kentucky Forest Leadership Program.

Sources interviewed for this article agree that promoting EE certification makes sense. “The EE profession needs to market itself better,” Dent says. “It’s not just about having a certificate on your wall. It’s much more about communicating to others outside our community who we are.”

Committing to Lifelong Learning

C Communicating “who we are” becomes much more explicit when it’s backed up by the core competencies that certified environmental educators share and the values that going through the certification process allows them to demonstrate.



Photo provided by Libby Wilcox

“From a management point of view, this is the kind of person I want [on my staff],” says Leslie DuBey, resource education specialist at Big Thicket National Preserve in Kountze, TX. “A person committed to self-improvement and lifelong learning.”

As a certification candidate herself, DuBey, were she in hiring mode, would definitely be swayed by candidates who were certified environmental educators.

Teachers participating in a hands-on activity led by educator Amy Sauls with the NC Estuarine Research Reserve at the Albemarle Sound. This workshop is part of a weeklong professional development opportunity that provides credit toward the NC Environmental Education Certification Program.

If they can pass [certification], they can probably pass my personnel requirements for filling the job.

- Leslie DuBey

“If they’ve completed this program, they’ve done a lot of my personnel work for me,” she says. “If they can pass [certification], they can probably pass my personnel requirements for filling the job.”

Not Just a Summer in the Woods



Even though most teachers and employers still need to be educated about the value of using certified EE professionals in their programs, “Within the EE community, people are largely on board [with respect to the benefits of being certified in environmental education],” Case says.

Libby Wilcox, who directs North Carolina’s certification program and was certified in 2003 as part of her job requirements, agrees.

Wilcox credits the certification program with increasing environmental literacy throughout the state and with creating a stronger network of environmental educators.

But certification is also transformational, Wilcox says. An America the Beautiful county coordinator says she was hired because she was certified. A builder who went through the program now takes soil samples instead of indiscriminately applying fertilizer in the finishing stages of a building project “just because it’s protocol.” A science teacher turned freelance writer said EE certification changed her life.

“It’s not just a temporary summer in the woods,” Case adds. “[Being certified] certainly gives you more confidence and skills, and a better sense of EE as a career choice.”

“We owe it to ourselves and to our children to make sure EE has this important place in society,” says Teresa Mourad, NAAEE’s Chief Operations Officer. “[Certification programs] help legitimize the field and give it the attention it deserves.”

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Photo provided by Leslie DuBey



“Guinea pigs” held a retreat to test some of the new certification program requirements for professional environmental educators in Texas. Left to right: Pat Marks, Houston Arboretum; Cathy Porter, Nature Conservancy; Janice Sturrock, Austin Nature Center; Leslie Dubey, National Park Service; Cheryl Stanco, Texas Forestry Association; Nicki Sohn, Texas State Aquarium; Cynthia Mercer, Ozen High School; Brenda Weiser, University of Houston.

Resources

Online Courses

Fundamentals of EE

Applied EE Evaluation

http://eetap.org/html/online_ee_courses.php

Both courses are currently offered through the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and are being evaluated for use in state certification programs as they are tightly aligned with the Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators.

Print

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http://naaee.org/news/communicator_fall04.pdf

Simmons, B. (ed). (2004). *Guidelines for the preparation and professional development of environmental educators*. Washington, DC: North American Association for Environmental Education.

Web

Dow, L. (n.d.). Courses and causes. Retrieved 11/17/05 from <http://www.learnnc.org/articles/coursescauses>

EE in Georgia

<http://eeingeorgia.org/page.asp?itemid=5459&siteid=4863>

Environmental Education and Training Partnership

www.eetap.org

Kentucky Environmental Education Council

www.state.ky.us/agencies/envred/certification.htm

North American Association for Environmental Education

www.naaee.org

North Carolina Office of Environmental Education

www.ee.enr.state.nc.us

Texas Environmental Education Partnership

www.texaseepartners.org/

Utah Society for Environmental Education

www.usee.org/capacity/certification.html